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*Article*

# Mitigating Seasonality in Regional Tourism: Tourism Practitioners' Reflections on Sport Events

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**Abstract:** Seasonality, one of the most outstanding characteristics of tourism, is recognized as a significant challenge for regional tourism, impacting the local economies and limiting sustainable development. Among the strategies that literature suggests in order to alleviate its negative effects is the organization of events. In particular, the holding of sport events has gained recognition as an essential element for all-year round tourism development. However, a deeper understanding of how tourism practitioners (who are those that face the personal and financial difficulties of seasonality) perceive the potential of sport events to smooth its challenges has not yet been explored enough. This study aims to fill this gap by examining tourism practitioners' views on the role of sport events, particularly running ones, in mitigating tourism seasonality. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with tourism practitioners from selected regions of Greece who, as active stakeholders, shared their perspectives in the development of regional tourism through the year round. The data gathered from these interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that most of the respondents recognize seasonality as a significant challenge and they share a common concern regarding its adverse effects on both regional tourism and on their local businesses. Themes of survival and sustainability emerged consistently, emphasizing the need of implementing various initiatives, apart from sport events, to mitigate its effects. This study contributes to the broader discussion on seasonality, focusing on its economic and social implications, particularly from the perspective of tourism professionals. It also provides practical recommendations for destination managers on utilizing sport events as a tool for promoting tourism during off-season periods. Finally, the findings highlight the need for localized and collaborative initiatives to address seasonality issues and support sustainable development.

**Keywords:** tourism seasonality; sport events; destination marketing; off-season tourism; tourism professionals

## 1. Introduction

Tourism seasonality poses significant challenges for Mediterranean destinations leading to overtourism during peak periods and under-tourism in low-season periods [1]. It is a fundamental reality for most tourism businesses [2,3] as it negatively impacts them by leading to underutilized resources as well as to difficulties in staffing and in attracting investment [4]. In fact, in periods of seasonal fluctuations both the public and the private sector face barriers to efficiently handle service capacities; during peak seasons they struggle to address overcrowding and during the off-season they have to cope with underused resources [5]. However, despite its growing significance, seasonality remains one of the least understood aspects of tourism [3,6,7]. Literature has extensively explored and suggested strategies to mitigate the challenges of tourism seasonality but it also acknowledges that this issue is multifaceted and complicated [1,5–9]. Thus, a single solution that would be universally applicable, would be elusive [7].

One key strategy which is emphasized by both older and more recent literature involves the diversification of the tourism product; this includes a variety of initiatives such as festivals, conferences or events in order to attract visitors during the off-season period [3,5–7,9–13]. In this context, sport events have emerged as a rapidly growing sector within the global tourism industry, gaining significant popularity and being established as a prominent trend [14]. Sport events also have a multifaceted role in the achievement of the SDGs, as they not only contribute to health and well-being of the participants but also drive economic growth and foster social inclusion [15]. Given their increasing significance, scholars have called for continuous research efforts that will be related to the sustainability of sport events (especially small-scale ones) and their potential to address seasonal tourism challenges [16]. It is especially important to ensure the long-term viability of these events, as their success influences local businesses which are vital for the competitiveness of the tourism destinations; when these businesses face challenges, it is the entire community which is also affected [4,17]. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the diversity attitudes of tourism practitioners towards seasonality as their perspectives influence the strategies implemented to address it [3]. In this framework, the role of stakeholder engagement (mainly involving local businesses, tourists and policymakers) is emphasized in order to successfully develop and implement sustainable tourism strategies that also aim to address seasonality [18]. However, and while existing studies highlight the role of sport events in tourism development, little is known about the perspectives of tourism professionals regarding the effectiveness of these events as a strategy to alleviate seasonality.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the impacts of seasonality on regional tourism through the perspectives of tourism practitioners, with a particular focus on sport events and their role in tackling these challenges. A deeper understanding of these difficulties will enable both researchers and industry stakeholders to develop more effective strategies in order to minimize the negative effects of seasonal tourism. This study focuses on selected Greek regions, each characterized by diverse tourism landscapes, making them suitable to analyze the relationship between seasonality and sport events. In this regard, running events have emerged as particularly relevant because of their increasing popularity during the last decades, primarily in Greece but also globally [19].

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, an overview of seasonality in tourism is provided and strategies identified in previous research to mitigate its impacts are explored. Particular emphasis is given on the role of sport tourism with a focus on the perspectives of local tourism stakeholders. A qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews is adopted in order to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and the challenges that local practitioners face. The findings, derived through thematic analysis, not only highlight their perspectives but also incorporate their recommendations to enhance the impact of sport events. Finally, the discussion part provides a broader interpretation of the results while implications and limitations are considered.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Tourism Seasonality and the Role of Events*

Despite the increasing tourism demand globally, seasonality is a complicated phenomenon which still remains a challenge for many destinations [7,9,10,20] like Europe [21]. The Mediterranean region especially experiences significant seasonality, which impacts the performance of local tourism businesses [9,22,23]. In fact, the Mediterranean is characterized by a single peak seasonality pattern [21] and it is noted for having the highest levels of seasonality globally, because of its geographical location and the reliance on specific forms of tourism [9]. This type of seasonality impacts employment and GDP, leading to job fluctuations [1]. It also impacts both tourism demand and supply, making those economic activities that depend on tourism vulnerable to fluctuations [24].

Literature identifies several widely recognized strategies which aim to reduce seasonality. For example, it mentions increasing off-season demand [5–7,11,21], reducing peak-season demand [5,6,21], redistributing demand throughout the year [5,6,11,21], extending the main season [4,5,10,25],

promoting domestic tourism during the off-season [5,7,25], and staggering school and industrial holidays [5,25,26].

Apart from the above, literature frequently emphasizes the diversification of tourist attractions and the organization of off-season activities with an emphasis on sustainable tourism practices to address seasonality [1,5,6,9,10,21,25,26]. In destinations like the Mediterranean there is the need to diversify tourism offerings beyond the traditional “sea tourism” to attract visitors throughout the season [22], such as focusing on festivals and events [20]. The organization of events has been proven effective in motivating visitors to travel during low season period, especially in comparison with the implementation of digital innovations, such as a trip planner app [8]. The use of events as a strategy to combat tourism seasonality is particularly useful in overcoming challenges even within the context of more remote destinations [2]. Events can extend the tourism season, redistribute demand to alternative locations and contribute to the creation of a favourable destination image [7,9,11,24,27,28]. Targeted marketing initiatives that balance the foreign and domestic tourists are necessary in order to stabilize revenue and reduce reliance on seasonal periods [29]. Therefore, the diversification of tourism products through events would help destinations attract visitors during off-peak season [9]. Moreover, events are highlighted as a key strategy for the improvement of the destination resilience [24] but their success in addressing seasonality issues will depend on their alignment with the broader tourism infrastructure of the destination [2].

In countries within the Mediterranean, climate change poses further challenges for seasonality; for example, in Greece, climate change impacts its tourism sector and several seasonal vulnerabilities emerge. More specifically, Greek summer tourism faces challenges from rising temperatures while its winter tourism may suffer from unreliable snow conditions [30]. As a result, there is a growing need for sustainable tourism development to address the environmental impacts of seasonality in the Mediterranean and to maximize the benefits of tourism for the region [18,22].

## 2.2. Sport Tourism Events

As discussed above, the organization of events can serve as a valuable tool to reduce the negative impacts of seasonality. This is especially evident for sport events, particularly at regional levels, which can serve as strategic tools to attract visitors beyond the peak season [31]. Sport and tourism are both affected by seasonality but the evolving nature of sports offers opportunities for tourism to benefit from the extended sport calendars [31].

Regarding the Mediterranean destinations like Greece, which heavily depend on summer tourism, they can integrate sports into tourism in their efforts to address seasonality issues; this, in turn, will help them attracting tourists all-year round, contributing also to the sustainability of the destination [28,32].

Sport tourism significantly influences host destinations mainly by boosting the local economy through visitors' spending at various stages of the sport event [28,33]; moreover, destinations can generate several other impacts including tourism seasonality mitigation, jobs creation and income generation, business ventures and destination development [33–36]. Accordingly, cities are using sport events to revitalize urban areas despite the challenges and complexities that may occur [36]. Sport tourism involves the intersection of sport and tourism sectors and thus, it tends to create opportunities for several stakeholders and activities which combine both sports and tourism [35,37]. Within sport tourism, income is generated from various segments like active sport tourists, spectators and visitors [28,35,37].

Among events, small-scale ones are effective in extending the tourism season and attracting new visitors; examples of these include food festivals, cultural events, and sporting events [2]. In particular, small-scale sport events, like running ones, have demonstrated significant positive economic and social impacts, especially when compared with large scale ones [34,38,39]. Consequently, they are proposed as a sustainable alternative and a viable strategy for communities with suitable resources [38–40]. Participants in such events recognize that apart from the (immediate) economic benefits, small-scale sport events encourage future tourism and contribute to the



sustainability and tourism growth of the host destinations [34]. Small-scale sport events play this crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism development, mainly by extending the tourism season; given the significant role of tourism in the Greek economy, where tourism is a fundamental component of its national economy, the growing popularity of running events appears as a valuable opportunity to enhance the tourism sector [19,41].

Given the involvement of multiple stakeholders, collaboration is needed in sport event tourism to be successful [33]. In the post pandemic period, it has become critical to ensure collaboration in sport event tourism as a strategy for the sector to recover [37]. Sport event tourism is closely linked to the host destination; this means that it heavily relies on local resources and thus, it should be harmoniously integrated in the lives of the local residents [16].

### *2.3. Perspectives from Local Tourism Practitioners*

Considering the significant impact of tourism on local communities, it is vital to understand the perspectives of the locals as well as those factors that influence the sustainability of the destinations [42]. This section delves into some of these perspectives.

Local tourism professionals are those who face the main challenges of seasonality due to unemployment and reduced income [9,24]. Effects that they face may include financial losses, difficulties to maintain a stable workforce and concerns from the part of potential investors due to the uncertainty that is associated with the tourism industry [20]. Family businesses are particularly vulnerable to the challenges of tourism seasonality, as they face, among others, financial instability, overworking, disrupted social lives and reduced time with their children [4].

Given the impact of seasonality on communities, it is essential to consider the perspectives of the locals to ensure the resilience of the destinations. Successful destinations prioritize the quality of life of the locals while they tend to avoid potential negative impacts of tourism development [42]. Tourism entrepreneurs assess not only economic but also non-economic factors, like the quality of life, in their decision to close their businesses during the off-season period [24]. Thus, the role of local professionals is important in the mitigation of the seasonality challenges; they can leverage their unique understanding of the local market and its characteristics to proactively develop strategies that will attract visitors during the off-season period [10].

Studies which examine seasonality across different geographical destinations often draw attention to the challenges that tourism practitioners face. For instance, [3] investigate seasonality in Wales and its impact on tourism enterprises; they highlight the importance of considering the diverse perspectives of tourism businessmen in order to develop effective strategies to manage seasonality. Similarly, [12] analyze the effects of seasonality on alpine tourism and hospitality operations in New South Wales, Australia, through semi-structured interviews with hospitality managers. The results of their study demonstrate the need for collaborative efforts to tackle seasonality challenges in the alpine tourism sector; proactive strategies are also needed.

Small tourism businesses in rural areas also struggle with seasonality difficulties. [26] explore the complicated relationship between seasonality and business operators in rural Scotland and highlight how lifestyle motivations and several operational characteristics influence their decisions. Applying a qualitative approach, [17] explore the effects of seasonality on family-owned micro-tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria and uncover the coping strategies that they adopt; these businesses experience significant seasonality which leads to income fluctuations and operational challenges, yet, they remain open through the year-round.

[20] explore the effects of seasonality on small and medium tourism businesses in South Grippsland, Australia. Their study reveals the challenges that rural tourism destinations face when they try to adopt collaborative approaches to mitigate seasonality. Often tourism professionals have different perceptions on seasonality and the strategies needed to address it [20]. [43] adopt a mixed-methods approach to examine how seasonality affects Chinese rural households; their study reveals that during the peak-season rural households invest more in tourism-related activities whereas in the off-season periods they combine tourism work with other activities to increase their income.

Of course, public authorities should not rely only on professionals to address seasonality, despite the fact that the latter play a role in mitigating its impact [24]. The importance of collaboration between the public and the private sector is highlighted when developing and implementing strategies to tackle seasonality [23].

As regards the Mediterranean destinations tourism seasonality significantly impacts residents' well-being; despite the positive economic benefits of tourism, residents may face increased stress and disruptions to their daily routine (Bimonte et al., 2019). Therefore, in order to evaluate the success of tourism development in these destinations, it is important to consider the perspectives of residents, apart from traditional economic indicators [44].

While an extensive range of the tourism literature has examined seasonality, research on exploring the local tourism practitioners' perceptions on the role of events in mitigating the seasonal fluctuations is limited, particularly within regional tourism. To address this gap, this study investigates seasonality in the context of sport tourism events. Its aim is to illuminate the challenges that tourism practitioners face because of seasonality and to understand their opinions and perceptions as regards these challenges.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Procedure

This research adopted a qualitative methodology where semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. This approach was deemed as the most suitable as it enabled the researchers to gain insights into the experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved [45], in our case the tourism practitioners.

In this study, the questions aimed to explore the tourism practitioners' perspectives on key issues related with the challenges they confront because of seasonality, the potential of sport events to attract visitors during the off-season period as well as the impacts they experience when sport events are organized in their region when there is a low tourism demand.

In Figure 1, a brief of the research procedure is depicted.

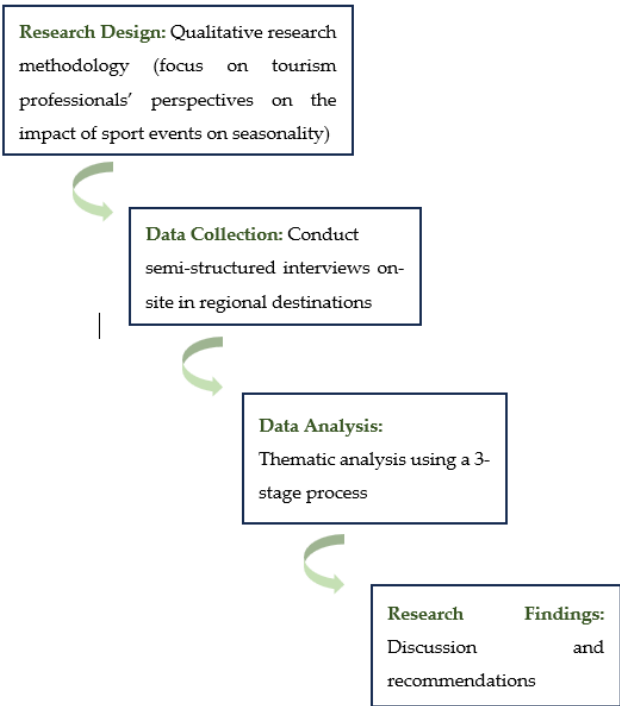


Figure 1. Research procedure flowchart.

### 3.2. Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was considered as the most appropriate; interviews are widely recognized as a primary method for data collection in qualitative research while semi-structured interviews are a commonly employed technique [46]. Especially, face-to-face interviews were chosen as suitable as through their structured framework they ensure consistency while they still allow flexibility between the interviewer and the participant [47].

The development of the interview questions was guided by key concepts related to the impact of sport events on seasonality, as perceived by tourism practitioners. Their aim was to explore their perceptions regarding how sport events can be leveraged to mitigate the challenges of seasonality within the studied destinations; these interview questions are as follows:

Q1. How do tourism practitioners perceive the challenges of seasonality in their region?

Q2. How do they perceive the role of sport events in attracting visitors during the off-season period?

Q3. Which are the impacts for tourism practitioners when small-scale sport events are organized in their region during periods of low-tourism demand?

### 3.3. Study Area and Participant Selection

A diverse range of tourism practitioners across six regional Greece destinations was chosen for this study. Urban areas within regional tourism landscapes like Eptapyrgion Thessaloniki and Katerini, coastal areas such as Paralia Katerinis, small towns in a regional setting like Tyrnavos Larissa, and rural areas like Skydra Pella and Krokos Kozanis were included. These destinations were chosen to present the varying impacts of sport events on seasonality, from local businesses perspective. In these locations, sport (running) events are held during the off-season period to attract visitors and support the local economies.

The participants were selected through a purposive sampling strategy in order to ensure the representation of a diverse range of roles and perspectives within the tourism sector. Thus, a broad spectrum of the tourism industry was represented, from accommodation providers, food and beverage providers, car rental agencies, travel and booking agents to retail shops, recreational service providers, and operators of private attractions and entertainment venues. The aim was to ensure that the study would capture the perspectives of key stakeholders across the different segments of the tourism industry within regional Greece. Collaboration with local stakeholders, such as tourism associations, facilitated the identification of suitable participants. A final sample of thirty tourism practitioners agreed to participate in the study. The thirty interviews align with established guidelines for grounded theory research, which typically recommends a sample size between 20 and 30 participants [48]. This range is supported by evidence from successful qualitative studies demonstrating that this number often maximizes data richness while minimizing the collection of redundant information [48].

The majority of the practitioners involved in the interviews were in fact residents of the destination to ensure that the study captured the perspectives of those who are directly impacted by seasonality. In regions with seasonality issues, businesses often face both personal and financial impacts like intense workload and limited personal time during peak season as well as financial strain during the off-season [4].

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In order to facilitate the interview process, the interviews were conducted at the workplaces of each one of the thirty tourism professionals. Conducting research within the participants' environment allows the qualitative researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives [49]. Besides, it is important to explore participants within their everyday environments to understand how their experiences and behaviors are influenced by the various

contexts of their lives [45]. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each, allowing for in-depth exploration of their perspectives.

A thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, employing a systematic coding approach to identify key themes related to seasonality and sport events. The data analysis followed a three-step coding process [50–52]: Firstly, open coding was conducted to identify recurring themes and concepts. Then, axial coding was employed to explore the relationships between these codes and to understand deeper the data. Finally, through selective coding the findings were integrated into a set of themes aligned with the objectives of the data.

## 4. Findings

Three primary themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Acknowledgement of Tourism Seasonality, (2) Sports Events and Sustainability and (3) Destination Development, which are further discussed in the following sections and presented in Figure 2:

### Key theme 1 - Widespread Acknowledgement of Tourism Seasonality

Tourism practitioners widely acknowledge that their regions experience intense seasonality, which significantly impacts their businesses. While the peak season varies across different locations, respondents consistently highlight the cyclical nature of tourism demand. For example, some destinations attract visitors during specific periods, such as the saffron harvest in Krokos Kozanis or the carnival events in Tyrnavos Larissa, while other regions rely heavily on summer tourism, like the case in Paralia Katerinis and Katerini Pieria.

On the other hand, the low season period is characterized by a sharp decline in visitor numbers; because of this fact, it is difficult for businesses to sustain their operations throughout the year. In many cases, professionals report that tourist activity is minimal during off-peak months, with some months being almost entirely unproductive.

*"The tourist season is really limited, maximum 3 months. We survive during summer but in winter we suffer", Katerini Pieria*

*"Tourists (domestic and international, like Turks) come in our region mainly for the Carnival events. Some months, like November, are completely unproductive", Tyrnavos, Larissa*

*"The village survives only because of summer tourism. There is work only during summer thanks to tourists. Visitors keep coming during winter because of Olympus but there is nothing to do in our village and almost everything is closed" Paralia Katerinis*

### - Negative impacts

The economic and business impact of seasonality is particularly evident in the financial instability which tourism enterprises face. Many professionals note that reduced demand during the low season results in lower revenue, making it difficult to cover operational expenses. As a result, many businesses often fight to remain financially viable. Some of the respondents stated that they are forced to seek alternative sources of income; for example, they either take on additional jobs or have to rely on financial support from their family members. Those who manage to stay open during the off-season often significantly reduce their staff and limit their services. Several respondents highlight the necessity of making strategic financial decisions, such as setting aside funds during the high season to compensate for losses incurred in the low season. However, even with this kind of precautions, the unpredictability of demand remains a challenge for them, with some businesses reporting extreme fluctuations in profitability between seasons. For example:

*"During winter, most enterprises are closed or underperform and it is difficult to respond to our obligations", Paralia Katerinis*

*"Thanks to tourists that come during summer, our local economy stays stable for the rest of the year. Otherwise, the economy of Katerini would not be alive", Katerini Pieria*

Apart from the economic and business negative implications, seasonality affects the socio-cultural and environmental dynamics of the destinations. During peak season, professionals report a



generally positive impact on their communities. The benefits they mention include increased social interactions, knowledge exchange and diversity among visitors. Some of them even note personal opportunities that arise from tourism, such as relationships formed with international visitors who return annually. However, the low season brings a contrasting reality, where many businesses close entirely and communities experience a sense of isolation due to the lack of tourism activity. In terms of environmental impact, most respondents acknowledge that while tourism increases traffic and pollution during peak months, these effects remain manageable and do not pose significant long-term concerns.

To cope with seasonality, tourism professionals mention that they employ a variety of strategies, from proactive measures to more passive adaptations. The proactive measures include discounts, special deals or enhanced customer service during the low-season period in order to enhance repeat visitation. Additionally, some businesses leverage social media and marketing campaigns to maintain engagement with potential visitors. Many of them also emphasize the importance of organizing events and promotions to attract customers during the off-season. On the other hand, some have to undertake cost-cutting measures so as to minimize losses, including reducing heating costs, limiting the purchase of raw materials and decreasing staff levels. In more extreme cases, some businesses simply close during the low season; in this case they rely on savings or financial assistance until the next peak period. Or others pursue alternative business ventures to generate income during the months when tourism activity is minimal.

*"When the turnover increases, we increase the staff, we cover expenses and sometimes we invest in the improvement of our premises (changes on the decoration, painting, furniture). But throughout the low-season we give breaks to our staff, we reduce the purchases of goods, we have limited variety on our products", Eptapyrgion, Thessaloniki*

*"During low season, we purchase more raw materials of higher quality. In winter, only the family runs in the business, our staff does not work", Katerini Pieria*

*"In low season especially, we do everything we can to please the customers. We want them to come again so we are willing to offer our best services, even if it means that we will have to satisfy every requirement they may have", Paralia Katerinis*

*"We make cost reduction and try to save. We even save on the heating; we do not waste anything", Skydra Pella*

#### - **Lack of institutional support**

A recurrent concern among tourism professionals is the perceived lack of institutional support from local authorities. Many among them express their frustration because of the absence of targeted initiatives that would aim to mitigate the negative effects of seasonality.

*"Seasonality is a problem in our region but the authorities do not support us at all", Eptapyrgion, Thessaloniki*

*"Municipality mainly looks after itself and not the surrounding villages", Krokos Kozanis*

*"Local authorities should implement more favorable payment arrangements of debts for periods when businesses have low performance", Paralia Katerinis*

*"They should provide tax breaks mainly in low-season and also help young entrepreneurs in their first steps", Skydra Pella*

*"We receive no support; definitely not at all mainly during low-season. Neither from the Chamber of Commerce nor from the state" Katerini Pieria*

*"They should help businesses get back on their feet with small tax breaks", Katerini Pieria*

In their view, local authorities could play a more active role in promoting the region, for example by improving infrastructure or by developing new attractions that would encourage visits through the year-round. Several professionals suggest the establishment of cultural institutions, such as museums, as well as the organization of additional events during the off-season to attract visitors beyond the traditional peak months. Despite these concerns, only a small number of professionals

report that they indeed receive meaningful support from local authorities. The majority of them believe that more structured interventions are needed to address seasonality in a sustainable manner.

*"They should initiate new campaigns to promote the area and the local products", Skydra Pellas*

*"Local authorities should organize more events and also complete the museum", Krokos Kozanis*

*"We need more advertising, more support through events organized by local authorities", Katerini Pieria*

*"They should organize events, including traditional festivals, that attract both local residents and foreign tourists", Eptapyrgion Thessaloniki*

## **Key theme 2 – Sport Events and Sustainability**

### **- Economic, social and environmental impact**

In alignment with existing literature, small-scale events, such as road races, generally have a positive contribution to the local economy since they generate tourism flow during periods of low visitor activity. Several professionals acknowledge that this kind of events help attract visitors who would not come to their region during the off-season.

*"There is tourist flow during a period where visitors would not come; it is indeed a different Sunday", Katerini Pieria*

*"Of course, the running race does good in my business, so many visitors come!", Krokos Kozanis*

However, not all local businesses capitalize on these events since they believe that one day is not enough. So, they suggest that the organizers extend the event in more days as some visitors often leave the area immediately after the event ends.

As regards the social impact of small-scale running events on their local communities, the findings suggest that most of the participants perceive it positively. These events encourage local participation, foster social interactions between residents and visitors and improve social life. For example, it was noted:

*"Local community participated, exercised and developed relationships with visitors. Regardless of age, they got out of their house and participated", Krokos Kozanis*

*"During the running race, there is a pleasant atmosphere, locals take part with their children and they are all happier, in a good spirit", Skydra Pella*

Consistent with prior studies, our findings suggest that these events have a minimal or negligible impact on the environment. In some cases, they can even contribute positively by fostering improvements, for example:

*"Every new activity like this is positive; the environment is positively touched, for example, new trails are created", Krokos Kozanis*

*"Environment is not affected given that the event organizers take care of this issue", Katerini Pieria*

Although some minor inconveniences, such as traffic congestion and litter, were mentioned, these were generally considered manageable.

*"There is just some traffic and some rubbish but everything is cleaned up quickly", Eptapyrgion Thessaloniki*

### **- Seasonality mitigation**

Although some respondents remain skeptic, mainly because of the broader economic difficulties that they face, the majority of them recognize that small-scale sport events, like running events, play a role in addressing tourism seasonality. The events contribute to the extension of the tourism season and the promotion of the destination during low-season period. Some professionals give emphasis on the promotional benefits of the events, while others call for additional initiatives beyond a single event, as following:

*"Even one tourist in our hotel is better than none at all. As long as the event is promoted, our village is promoted", Paralia Katerinis*

*"Thanks to the event there are tourists during a period that no one visit our region", Katerini Pieria*

*"Yes, the event is a way to help strengthen the local economy in a period with no tourists", Skydra Pella*

*"One event is not enough, more events and other actions should be organized during the low season", Krokos Kozanis*

*"It is good that events like that are taking place but they must increase in number", Eptapyrgion Thessaloniki*

### **Key theme 3 – Destination Development**

#### **- Structured collaborations**

The organization of sport events presents a range of impacts for local tourism practitioners and influences several aspects of regional tourism development. The findings highlight both opportunities and challenges for the respondents.

Firstly, although sport events can contribute to tourism development, complimentary actions are needed in order to maximize their impact. Several professionals emphasize the importance of close collaboration with event organizers so as to ensure mutual benefits and successful event execution. This may include proactive communication, shared planning, and the provision of relevant services to event participants. Some express interest in working closely with event organizers to enhance the visitor experience; for example, they suggest offering customized services.

*"We would like to cooperate with the organizers and work together on the preparation. For example, we could prepare a special menu for the event participants based on the directions of the organizers. This could be an extra motive for the athletes to come", Paralia Katerinis*

*"Along with the event, a general effort should be made in order to promote the brand name of Katerini. Exhibitions and other activities be organized in favor of small enterprises, so that the local products be promoted even during winter", Katerini Pieria*

*"It is a matter of mindset to respond proactively and make more efforts to highlight the region. Residents, enterprises and authorities could come together and find transparent solutions", Tyrnavos Larissa*

#### **- Wider tourism development strategies**

Another recurring concern is the limited promotion of certain sport events; thus, they highlight the need for better communication and advertising of events to increase awareness among local businesses and the general public. Despite the fact that there are well-established sport events, many tourism practitioners remain under-informed about them, reducing their potential benefits for the region.

*"Suitable tourist attractions should be created and a better promotion abroad applied", Paralia Katerinis*

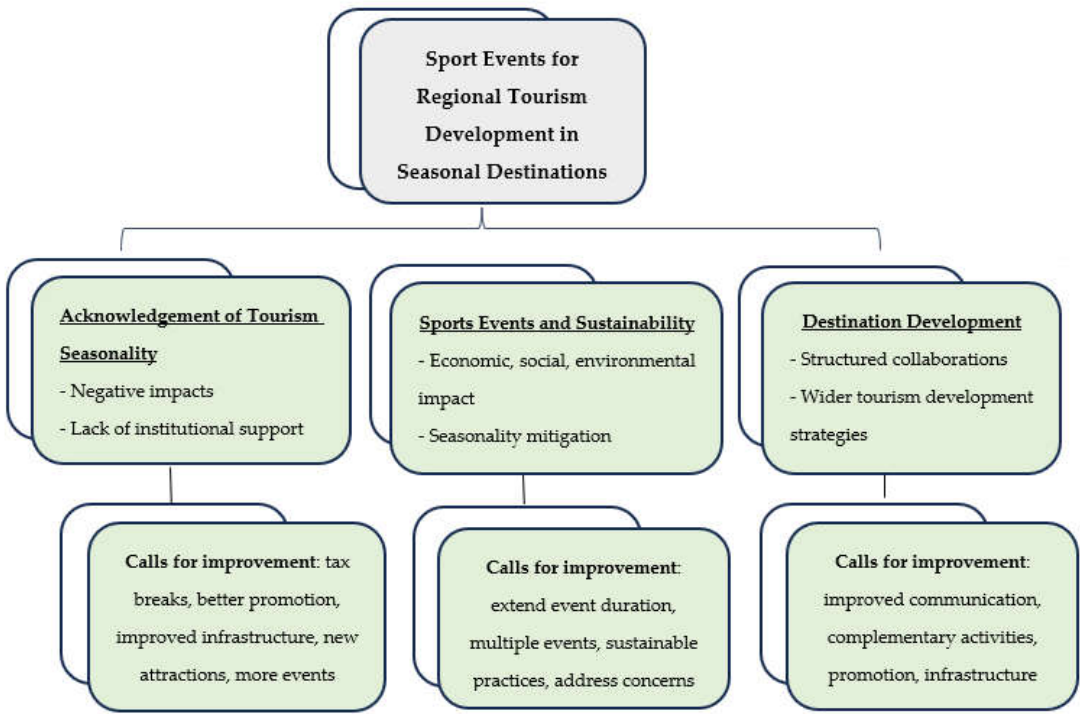
*"More advertising and promotion of Katerini in all the media, even in the low season, so that visitors realize that our town is also a winter destination", Katerini Pieria*

Furthermore, apart from the event, broader strategic efforts are required to establish the development of the destination. They suggested that complementary activities, including exhibitions, cultural activities, and local product showcases could be organized alongside sport events as an opportunity to promote local businesses, products and services.

*"More athletic events could be created like mountain bike races. We could also attract tourists by establishing events based on our local products (wine, tsipouro)", Tyrnavos Larissa*

*"We do not fully utilize our spaces. For example, we could increase the number of pedestrianized areas and create adequate parking facilities to accommodate the visitors during the event", Skydra Pella*

*“The monument should be maintained and utilized. The roads are in a bad condition, the transportation is difficult and there is no route that would serve the area”, Eptapyrgion, Thessaloniki*



**Figure 2.** Summary of research findings and recommendations.

**5. Discussion**

*5.1. Perceptions of Seasonality by Local Tourism Practitioners*

The findings reveal that among the respondents there is a deeply felt acknowledgement of the challenges that tourism seasonality poses. In fact, seasonality is a major concern for them impacting their business operations, their financial stability and their overall well-being. The findings strongly align with existing literature on seasonality and its significant challenges for tourism businesses [3,9,11,17,20,24,43,46].

According to practitioners, and consistent with existing research, the negative impacts associated with tourism seasonality include economic stability and financial strain; that is reduced revenue, increased costs in low-season and difficulties in meeting their financial obligations [4,9,24], decreased staff, reduced purchasing power and limited investing opportunities during the period with low tourism demand [20,28].

As many of these businesses rely heavily on family assets, the potential for business failure because of seasonality is a considerable risk of financial and personal loss for them [4,17]. Therefore, they call for financial incentives such as tax breaks or debt relief to help them survive in the off-season. They emphasize that tax reductions during this period could ease their financial strain and help them remain operational throughout the year. Moreover, they expressed their perceived lack of support from local authorities and they suggested that the authorities play a more active role in supporting them. According to the respondents, this lack of support includes limited financial assistance, insufficient marketing efforts as well as lack of infrastructure development.

From their part, tourism practitioners identified several strategies to mitigate the effect of seasonality, the most commonly suggested include tax breaks and financial incentives a well as better promotion and marketing efforts to attract visitors all the year round. It also includes investing in

tourism infrastructure such as roads, public spaces and cultural attractions to enhance the experience of the potential visitors. In addition, they call for the expansion of existing events and festivals, including cultural or sport-related events.

### *5.2. Perceptions of the Role of Sport Events in Attracting Visitors During The Off-Season Period*

The interviews revealed a positive perception of tourism professionals on the role of sport events in attracting visitors in the off-season period. It is also evident in the study that sport events are increasingly recognized as valuable tools for regional tourism development, particularly in addressing seasonality but also in enhancing local economies. Several practitioners noted that sport events bring visitors to their region and that they can act as a mechanism to extend the tourism season. They also believe that sport events contribute to the overall sustainability of tourism in their community. Specifically, for them the role of sport events in regional tourism is multi-faceted; these events mitigate the negative effects of seasonality in periods that otherwise there would be minimal tourist activity (illustrating the direct financial benefits for their businesses) [34,37,40,53] but also, sport events foster social engagement and create shared experiences among locals within their communities contributing to improved quality of their life [40,53,54]. From an environmental perspective, they expressed that the sport events have a minimal negative impact that can be effectively addressed with proper planning [40,53]. According to the respondents, some events even contribute positively to the environment by encouraging improvements on the existing infrastructure.

However, and although these events have been proven beneficial, there is a consensus among them that a single sport event is not sufficient. Thus, they highlight the need for a long-term approach that will incorporate multiple events which will be spread across the off-season period to help maximize their impact. Other areas for improvement include the extension of the duration of the events to maximize the visitor spending in their region. Also, there were calls for greater emphasis on sustainable practices in event planning mainly through the support of local communities and through responsible resource use in high season. Finally, they recognize the sustainable impact of the events thus they raised some concerns as regards their implementation. They suggest proactive measures, better planning and coordination and effective management from the part of the organizers to fully leverage the potential of the sport events for the destination.

### *5.3. Perceptions of Tourism Practitioners on the Impacts of Small-Scale Sport Events Held in Low-Season Period*

Tourism practitioners acknowledge that sport events have significant implications for the growth of the destination, mainly in low-season, which also impacts their businesses. Indeed, they perceive sport events as catalysts for broader destination development and not merely as isolated events. However, although recognizing the benefits of sport events, they primarily focus on proposing actions to enhance these positive impacts. According to them, tourism development can be achieved through structured collaborations among the stakeholders that are involved in the sport event. From their part, some express a strong willing to engage in partnerships that will enhance the experiences of the visitors, such as the design of tailored offerings for the event participants. They also stress the need for broader initiatives, such as exhibitions or promotional activities within the event, in order to showcase the local products of the region. In addition, a broader call for a shift in the mindset among stakeholders was revealed. Collaborative approaches among stakeholders (organizers, businesses, residents, local authorities), transparent cooperation as well as collective planning in order to maximize the benefits of sport events are recommended. Collaboration between the public and the private sector, including incentives to help businesses remain open during the off-season, is necessary [24]. However, and despite its cruciality, several factors hinder effective collaboration involving competition, conflicting interests and short-term planning [20].

Beyond sport events, the respondents point out the need to develop complementary attractions and to improve destination marketing to ensure that their regions will remain appealing not just



before and after the event but throughout the year. Suitable tourist attractions and on-going promotional efforts through various media platforms will position their region as a year-round destination. Others suggest the diversification of the types of the events that are hosted, for example mountain bike races instead of mere road races or festivals designed around their local products, like tsipouro.

For the aforementioned to be achieved successfully, they once again mention the infrastructure improvements as a necessary step to leverage better the potential of sport events. For example, in some cases they highlight the underutilization of public spaces or the need for better-maintained monuments. Road improvements and better transportation access are also pointed out. Improved communication through effective information sharing and concerns addressing is another strategy. They also suggest complementary activities such as cultural events, festivals and local product demonstrations to enhance the visitors' experiences and create unique experiences for the visitors. Finally, targeted marketing efforts to promote both the sport event and the tourism offerings of their community will build the brand awareness for their region that will attract visitors in all seasons. They believe that these improvements will not only optimize the (positive) impact of the sport events but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the destination.

## 6. Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature of tourism seasonality by examining its impacts on businesses within the sport tourism context from the perspective of local tourism practitioners. It confirms the findings of previous studies as regards the general difficulties and negative impacts of seasonality while it also highlights the unique challenges that local tourism practitioners face in regional destinations. The focus on their viewpoints provides valuable information into their experiences, concerns and proposed strategies to leverage sport events for extending the tourism season. These findings raise important considerations as concerns the way of applicability of existing seasonality mitigations strategies. The practitioners' recommendations, which emphasize the need for better promotion, improved infrastructure, more frequent and extended events, along with sustainable practices and enhanced collaboration between stakeholders, can directly inform the development of tourism development strategies at regional destinations; thus, it bridges the gap between theoretical discussions on seasonality and practical solutions. Their recommendations can also serve as a foundation for future research in different contexts, like other types of events or other regions.

From a practical viewpoint, this study emphasizes the importance of involving local stakeholders in the planning and implementation of several tourism development activities. Also, the study encourages the exploration of diversified tourism products, such as those offered by small-scale sport events. Besides, policymakers (like DMOs) can utilize the findings to develop targeted programs to extend the tourism season. Event organizers can tailor their event offerings to better align with the needs and interests of local communities. Finally, and since enhanced collaboration is highlighted by the respondents, key stakeholders can benefit from these findings to ensure successful implementation of events and sustainability and season extension for the destination.

## 7. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

In summary, seasonality is an important characteristic of tourism which poses significant challenges as extensively highlighted in the tourism literature. These challenges are even more substantial for local businesses in regional areas, since they are more vulnerable to fluctuations in tourism demand. Various strategies have been proposed by literature to mitigate its effects, with events being one of the most commonly approaches.

This study conducted interviews with 30 representatives of tourism businesses from regional Greece to investigate the impacts of seasonality on their businesses and to explore their views on the role of sport events to mitigate these challenges. The significant impact of seasonal fluctuations in

tourism demand was generally acknowledged and many respondents expressed considerable difficulties to manage these difficulties. Our findings suggest that in the context of mitigating seasonality, local practitioners identify the need for improved marketing and promotion, enhanced infrastructure and development of new attractions as well as the organization of more diverse and extended events. They also emphasize the importance of sustainable practices and of improved collaboration among stakeholders that will support these efforts.

Despite the valuable findings presented in this study, a few limitations need to be mentioned. One limitation is the sample size of the respondents. However, collaborative research teams often receive data saturation with 30 or fewer interviews in the majority of the cases [48]. Although the qualitative nature of this study provides rich insights, its findings may not be generalizable to all settings. Also, the research focuses on a specific set of Greek destinations which may not fully capture the experiences of other regions that face similar seasonality challenges. Lastly, a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of sport event on seasonality would benefit from incorporating views from other stakeholders, such as local authorities, tourists or athletes.

Future studies could expand the geographical scope to include more destinations or regions with different types of sport events to further explore their impacts on seasonality. Also, future research could compliment these findings with quantitative approaches such as visitor surveys or assessments on the economic impacts of the local businesses. Finally, a fruitful expansion of this study lies in the examination of the perspectives of more stakeholders, like policymakers, event organizers and visitors.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at the website of this paper posted on Preprints.org.

**Author Contributions:** For research articles with several authors, a short paragraph specifying their individual contributions must be provided. The following statements should be used “Conceptualization, S.G. and C.V.; methodology, S.G. and C.V.; validation, S.G., C.V., I.K., G.F. and V.V.; formal analysis, S.G., C.V., I.K., G.F. and V.V.; investigation, S.G. and C.V.; resources, S.G. and C.V.; writing—original draft preparation, S.G., C.V., I.K., G.F. and V.V.; writing—review and editing, S.G., C.V., I.K., G.F. and V.V.; supervision, C.V.” All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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